



'My educational journey has become part of who I am'

Nicola McIntosh, current Chair of the Society of British Dental Nurses, recounts her career path, from dental nursing, to undergraduate, postgraduate, lecturer and beyond!

As I write it is the start of summer break for me, although classes finished a month ago. Today is the day after the Faculty of Social Sciences two-day Postgraduate Research Conference at the University of Stirling, which I volunteered to help organise at the start of the year. It was a great two days where our theme 'Together Again' really hit home, being the first in-person Faculty of Social Sciences conference since before the pandemic.

It was obvious the opportunity to connect with our peers is still sorely needed and undoubtedly paramount to our sense of community and belonging. Undertaking masters, professional doctorates and PhDs can be quite isolating, especially if your family and friends have – understandably after several years – forgotten what it is you are currently working on, or you have fallen into one of many rabbit holes. Attending face to face events where the opportunity to meet your peers, discuss progress and share experiences, good and bad, with those on a similar journey, can really make all the difference.

Now I have a little free time and space in my mind, I am reflecting on the past year, as I have done most summers during my journey, since returning to education as a mature student. At 40-years-old, I am now five years into my studies having completed a BSc Dental Nursing between 2018–2021, a PgDip Tertiary Education with Teaching Qualification (Further Education) 2021–2022,

alongside a placement as a dental nursing lecturer, followed in 2022 by beginning the Doctor of Education (EdD) course at the University of Stirling. All of these courses have been undertaken whilst working 3–4 days within general dental practice, and of course some of them during a pandemic, which is something I never thought I would write.

As a dental nurse the opportunity to progress to this level is something that is achievable, for those who wish to, thanks to the educational pathways for dental nurses in Scotland. The availability of dental nursing qualifications from SCQF level 3 through to SCQF level 9, which is a degree programme developed and delivered by New College Lanarkshire in association with UWS, provide

to higher education this past year to begin her studies in education. Both having assignments and deadlines, on top of family life, has been an interesting experience but one that has brought us closer, like most challenges do. I will not pretend being motivated every day, especially after five years, is always easy. Burnout is real, as is imposter phenomenon, so being dedicated, developing good study habits and taking breaks when they are needed is essential. It is okay to say today needs to be a 'me day' and do something for yourself or your family; today we took our children to meet and feed some incredibly friendly alpacas in the sun, which was lovely!

That said my educational journey has become part of who I am, I see it as part of life instead of something to get to the

patient awareness of the links between oral health and diabetes. It was startling that key information on the importance of good oral health was not being communicated effectively to this patient group, by the many professionals they had regular contact with. This project coincided with the beginning of the pandemic and is when I would say my outlook changed and I began looking at the bigger picture in relation to oral health, which moved my studies towards education and public health. However, in order to undertake my own research, I knew I had to progress to a doctoral programme. This desire fuelled my studies.

After completing the postgraduate diploma, I was fortunate and delighted to be accepted for the Doctorate in Education and the Professional Doctorate in Dentistry by different institutions, on the same day! It was a very hard decision but, in the end, I chose education as it was more closely aligned with my future ambitions. Nevertheless, after a year of taught research focused modules, in preparation for the master's dissertation and following thesis stage, I decided after a good deal of soul searching and some sound advice, to redirect my studies and progress on to a master's in public health next year. This is where my passion lies and remaining focused long term is considerably easier if you love what you do. My current research interests are focused on oral health education and young people. There is a lack of research on this age group and several age-related risks which impact on oral health; young people are unfortunately more likely to develop patterns of risk behaviours,¹ which can lead to the potential for tobacco use, alcohol intake, drug use, and increased frequency and consumption of sugar, all of which increase the risk of oral diseases.² Dental ill-health is present worldwide and decay in permanent teeth was in 2019 the most common health problem.³ We know dental health is positively impacted by sound educational intervention, and my research seeks to understand from young people's perspective how best to suggest an educational response.

During my studies I have had the

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this opportunity. Unfortunately, additional qualifications above those required for registration are not recognised currently by the General Dental Council. This is something I hope will change in the future, in order to acknowledge the hard work and additional skills of dental nurses who elect to gain further qualifications.

Returning to education as a mature student was a difficult choice, as it is for most, but continuing within higher education was harder. There were numerous factors to consider: childcare, part time employment, less time with family and friends and the costs of self-funding to name just a few. If this was not enough to consider, my wife also returned

end of; it is my happy place. I read research papers like many people scroll social media – it is what I do in my downtime. There are currently no specific pathways into research for dental nurses in Scotland, something I also hope will change in the future. There are opportunities to be involved in research projects, but these are few and far between, particularly when working within general dental practice. My desire to undertake my own research began during the second year of the BSc Dental Nursing, when I undertook modules in dental public health and in research. My excitement in collecting data to answer my own research questions was palpable – my small project focused on

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Useful resources

COURSES

- University of Stirling, Doctor of Education (EdD): <https://www.stir.ac.uk/courses/pg-taught/edd-educational-doctorate/>
- University of Dundee, Dentistry (Professional Doctorate) DProf: <https://www.dundee.ac.uk/postgraduate/profdoc-dentistry>
- University of Stirling, MPH Master of Public Health (Online): <https://www.stir.ac.uk/courses/pg-taught/public-health-online/>
- University of Stirling, PGDip Tertiary Education with Teaching Qualification (Further Education) – pre-service: <https://www.stir.ac.uk/courses/pg-taught/tqfe-pre-service/>
- New College Lanarkshire: dental nursing courses: <https://www.nclanarkshire.ac.uk/courses/access-to-dental-nursing>

LINKS

- The Society of British Dental Nurses: <https://sbdn.org.uk/>

opportunity to become part of the Society of British Dental Nurses (SBDN), first as a member then as an ambassador and co-editor, progressing to Scotland representative, and at the end of last year I was elected as Chair of the Society. The Society brings together the voices of dental nurses in all four nations, from a variety of backgrounds and sectors. This is one of the things that I value most about my involvement with the Society, who believe ‘everyone’s voice matters’. This aligns with my own beliefs, and I hope that my research will one day play a part in giving a voice to those who may often be overlooked.

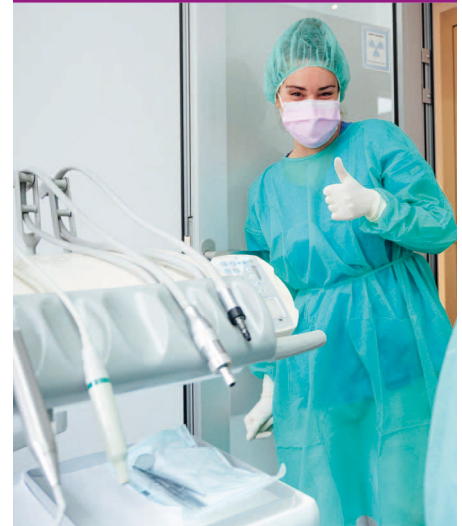
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3. World Health Organization. Oral health. Key facts. 14 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/oral-health> (accessed July 2023).

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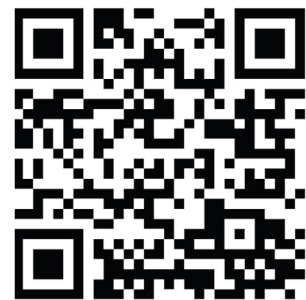
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